

The Importance of Experience in Orchid Judging
By Ernest Hetherington
Published in Awards Quarterly, Vol. 11, No. 2, page 60-61

Everything is judged by comparison so there must be a standard of measure. In the case of American Orchid Society Judges; our standard is beauty. To judge orchids we must have two or more of a kind or type, otherwise we have no standard by which a plant or flower can be judged. If we say something is unique, one of a kind, incomparable, it is an exception and not within the parameters of our discussion.

There are two prerequisites to being an American Orchid Society Judge. The first is basic judgment. Some people have it — others do not. It can be developed to a high degree in some. In others it cannot. The other prerequisite is experience. We shall spend our time in this article on the importance of experience. The American Orchid Society's system of awards is the world's most highly-developed awards system. The basic concept was taken from The Royal Horticultural Society in England. It is very simply stated: "Recognition shall be given to improvement in each distinct and different type of orchid. Recognition may be given to new and desirably different types." This is easily stated and should be clearly understood. Too often it is not.

The American Orchid Society's system of awards is based upon this concept: "Recognition shall be granted to improvements of existing hybrid orchids and to desirably different types. Recognition shall be given also to superior forms of the species." The concept is not simply stated in any of the A.O.S. handbooks on orchid judging, but this is the concept of the American Orchid Society's system on judging. Understand it clearly and you have the basic foundation for understanding our entire system.

Our concern as Student, Probationary and Accredited Judges is how to gain experience. Unfortunately, there is no short cut. To judge, you must have seen — and to see takes time and effort. To gain knowledge about the various species and hybrids, the best thing to do is to get around and see orchids. Visit orchid nurseries, orchid growers, shows — wherever orchids can be seen. This is not easy, especially if you live away from a major orchid-growing area. The second best way to gain experience is to read. This is less desirable than seeing the live plants, however. Most of us are predominately visual with our senses and learn by seeing. The optimum, though, is both to see and read.

My objective here is to stress the importance of seeing hybrid orchid populations — whole groups of plants in bloom of a particular cross. When we see seedling groups of phalaenopsis, cattleyas, cymbidiums or paphiopedilums in bloom at the same time, we can look them over and say, "There's the best one over there...", "I see the average..." or "The percentages of good, average, and poor are..." Admittedly, this is an opportunity that usually comes only to a commercial orchid breeder. But not necessarily. Perhaps by these comments some readers will be inspired to go to commercial orchid ranges with the goal of seeing numbers of specific crosses in bloom. What the average for a cross might be and how good is "good" for that cross can only be determined by population study. If

you live in an orchid-growing area, make it a point to visit commercial orchid ranges or anyone who is doing hybridizing to see what is in bloom and to make notes, mental or otherwise. Every time you go to a commercial range you do not have to buy. State your business honestly and clearly. Hybridizers are pleased to give you information on their crosses. Some years ago in discussing a *Cattleya* cross with an amateur grower, I made a comment on the cross. I had seen a considerable quantity. The amateur grower's reply was "Not so. It is really an excellent cross." I asked how many he had seen. The reply was..."Two!"

Cattleya Prospector is one of the parents of *Laeliocattleya* Bonanza (*Cattleya* Prospector x *Laeliocattleya* Cavalese). Precisely which clone was used, I cannot say, but at one time Armacost & Royston had a house filled with *C. Prospector* — about a thousand plants. The cross was quite uniform. Several were better, however. These outstanding plants were marked and used for breeding. This is an excellent example of a population study. I wish to list a few well-known hybrids which most of us have seen and which have been raised and distributed in quantity throughout America. The average A.O.S. Judge can probably list certain cultivars which are superior, average or worse than others and tell of the average for the cross. Some of these are: *Cattleya* Bob Betts, *C. Bow Bells*, *Laeliocattleya* Bonanza, *Brassolaeliocattleya* Fortune, *Sophrolaeliocattleya* Jewel Box, *Lc. Amber Glow*. In phalaenopsis: *Phal.* Grace Palm, Doris, Ella Freed are famous hybrids. There are others which you can bring to mind. *Cymbidium* Lillian Stewart is perhaps one of the classic examples of population study. Eight thousand seedlings were raised with perhaps one hundred different clones receiving awards over the years. Most judges in areas where cymbidiums are grown know this cross. Many have judged it.

When we, as A.O.S. Judges, judge an orchid hybrid we must ask ourselves these questions: "What do the parents look like? Is the hybrid we see before us as good as either parent? Has it combined the best qualities of both — or the worst?" We then should ask, "How many have I seen of this cross?" Recently, at an orchid judging session my team was asked to judge a primary hybrid from a large-flowered angraecum and an aeranthes. It was more or less what you would expect from a primary hybrid — intermediate between the two parents. It was the first one I had seen, as it was with the other judges. That it was a pretty thing I do not question. Whether or not it was like all its brothers and sisters I cannot say. Perhaps a J.C. (Judges Commendation) should be given more often to lines of breeding which are new and which, frankly, the judges do not know enough about to judge fairly.

I recently saw another angraecum at a judging. It received an award. A few months later I saw a population of this same species in bloom, the result of a selfing. They were all perfectly uniform and just like the one which received the award. There is no way of preventing this from happening except to be aware that orchid species are increasingly being selfed. Often, a hybrid orchid flower is submitted for judging which the breeder knows is quite superior and deserving of an award. While the exhibitor knows it is the best of many, the judges, having seen few if any of the hybrid population, fail to award that particular flower because they lack knowledge (experience) of that line of breeding.

In short — if you do not know, do not “go it alone”; seek out those who do know and be guided and taught.

The American Orchid Society’s system of judging gives the judges maximum latitude to use their experience and judgment. It is not an easy system for it requires experience. Experience must be continually gained, for progress in orchid breeding is constant. A.O.S. Judges cannot rest on their laurels!

We cannot bring to mind any profession, craft, art or skill where we could say that review, study, further training, further experience were not necessary. We either go ahead in all our endeavors — or we go back. The maxim “Use it or lose it” applies to our knowledge of orchids, as it does to other things. There is so much to know about all phases of orchidology, including judging and hybridizing, that even now there are challenges to tax our abilities and experience wherever we look.

The skill of an American Orchid Society Judge is limited only by the effort he or she puts into being a good judge. There should be no plateaus — only new goals.